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Cloud computing gaining ground

By Yaj Malik

CLOUD computing is going beyond hype to gradual adoption by enterprises. This concept of computing as an on-demand, pay-per-use model creates operating and economic efficiencies that are appealing to businesses facing budgetary and competitive pressures.

And the maturing of enabling technologies such as virtualisation, grid computing, service-oriented architectures and metering tools, plus standardisation of business applications such as customer relationship management, enterprise resource planning, e-mail and collaboration, mark an inflection point for cloud computing to take off.

Cloud computing will impact companies to change their business models. Companies that usually invest in IT infrastructure to build their core competencies can now lease IT services. Instead of buying software and hardware, they can have computing resources delivered through the Internet to end users on demand and billed only for the computing hours, bandwidth megabits and storage gigabytes that they use.

This pay-per-use model offers a low-cost option to access technology as a variable cost resource and not as capital investment. Companies can leverage on the dynamic provisioning capability of a cloud to expand or reduce capacity quickly to adapt to changing business needs. Other benefits include simplicity and flexibility.

Possibilities, despite concerns

Yet, as adoption of cloud computing grows, so too are concerns about the risks. Most IT professionals agree that many enterprises have concerns about outsourcing critical and sensitive internal applications to an external cloud provider. Availability is also an issue, as seen in the recent Amazon EC2 problem with temporary outage.

Other concerns include security, compliance, lock-in to a single cloud provider, data ownership and service levels.

But these concerns have more to do with the way cloud services are delivered by service providers than with the concept itself.

Companies can avoid the limitations of traditional cloud by bringing it into the enterprise. Advances in virtualisation and distributed computing have allowed corporate network and data centre administrators to effectively adapt existing infrastructure to resemble cloud computing infrastructure and deliver IT services to "customers" within their companies. When cloud technology can be deployed inside the corporate firewall, companies can enjoy the best of both worlds and have the benefit of public cloud value propositions without sacrificing security and control.

Given that virtualisation is a key component of cloud computing, it is not surprising that many early-to-market cloud solution providers are market leaders in server virtual infrastructure. The shift towards cloud computing also has spawned startups such as 3Tera, Zimory,

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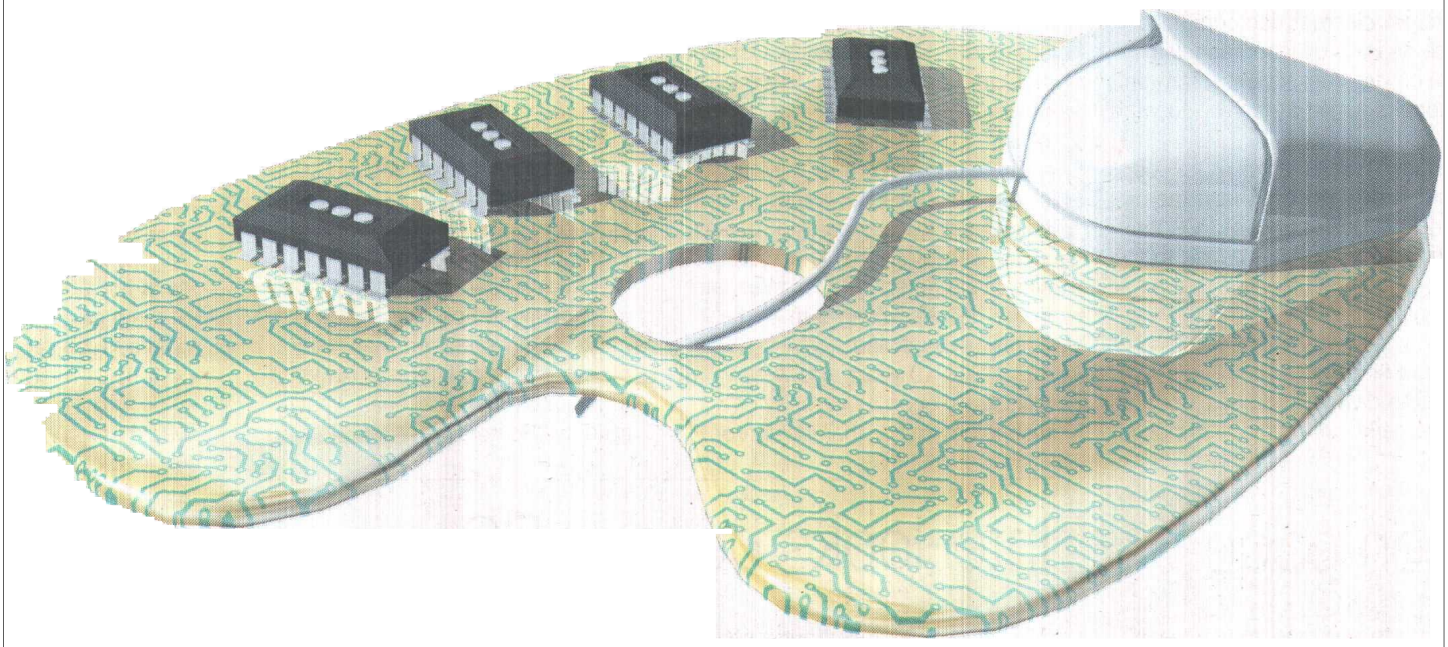
Surgient, Elastra and Enomolism.

Local prospects

Last July, Mimos and HP Malaysia said they would take part in a global multi-data centre and open source testbed called Open Cirrus to advance research in cloud computing. The creation of dynamic cloud services from this pact has the potential to enrich and even transform the everyday lives of the public.

Mimos is planning to develop a national cloud computing platform to deploy services throughout the country, focusing on enabling services through software, security frameworks and mobile interactivity as well as testing new cloud tools and methodologies.

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